

Toward More Reality and Realism in ESP Syllabuses

By Anna Jureckov

Since 1989 ESP syllabus designers in Slovakia have been more and more confronted with the needs of their clients. Slovak ESP teachers have begun to realize that English/foreign language teaching and learning should be less academic and more pragmatic. In other words, ESP syllabus/course designs should be realistic both in qualitative and quantitative aspects-in their contents and feasibility. As we know, there are two parties involved in the implementation of any syllabus programme-teacher and learner. Basically, if the syllabus is to be designed realistically, its contents must be coherent with the needs and wants of the clients. Additionally, the contents should be technically, physically, and mentally conceivable and able to be implemented within the time allotted in the curriculum. These requirements are without dispute and should be among the premises when designing the ESP syllabus. This was not always the practice in Slovakia. These problems became more evident after 1989 when the Slovak English teachers compared their teaching practices with those of immigrant teachers who were native speakers of English. The immigrant teachers were the first who indicated openly the problem of steeply graded syllabuses (Healey 1994). Admittedly, Slovak ESP teachers, myself included, were led to believe before that the syllabus and classroom presentation should encompass as many items, topics, pieces of information as was possible to press in the rather limited time allotted for ESP in the curricula. The mobilizing slogan of the Slovak ESP teachers was, or still is: Better more than less, so as not to miss or neglect something.

But let us look at the problem of the syllabuses and their "sense of reality" in a brief historical review. We can trace three main approaches applied in syllabus design, which push them more closely to the reality of foreign language communication and consequently to more realistic teaching/learning programmes. There are three main types of syllabuses:

1. **Structural syllabus.** This type of syllabus represented the model of foreign language teaching at its beginning. It was selected and graded according to grammatical notions of simplicity and complexity, focusing only on one aspect of language-formal grammar.
2. **Functional-notional syllabus.** In the 1970s this type of syllabus became an alternative to the structurally graded syllabuses in attempts to incorporate a broader view of language communication. Communicative skills rather than language per se became the focus of this syllabus type.
3. **Procedural and task-based syllabus.** This latest type focuses on and emphasizes classroom activities that stimulate internal learning processes. This syllabus type specifies the tasks, activities, and problems engaged in the classroom which will be carried out in the real world.

This brief review of approaches (see chart below) to foreign language teaching and learning demonstrates how the focus has shifted from instruction/explanation aimed at acquiring knowledge and skills to processes through which knowledge and skills are gained.

Methodologies of foreign language teaching and learning have developed to the point where they are complex and cover language description, learning theories and needs analysis (Hutchinson and Waters 1987:22). These are three major factors that should be reflected in any ESP course or syllabus design (see above).

To accept this in designing our own syllabuses means to show an increased sense of reality and balance. There should be time and balance reserved for not only presenting but also practicing linguistically and socially appropriate language relevant to the topics and situations our learners need to function in real life. Language objectives resulting from learners' needs should be included in the syllabus hand in hand with authentic activities/ tasks demonstrating and practising the language. If not, we face the danger that we cram the syllabus with too much "language," leaving very little or no time for students to practice it.

Practice is rather time-consuming (learning needs time) and many of our ESP teachers object to feeling that very little is taught in practice. We should not, however, forget to ask the question: How much of what is taught is given a chance to be learned/practised, especially in such a subject as foreign language?

Knowledge, information, and instruction delivered by the teacher or input texts should therefore have dynamic counterparts in real-life tasks, activities, and problems to be solved by the learners. This learning-centered dimension of the latest syllabus models was and still is neglected in the Slovak traditionally designed syllabuses. (My generation of teachers is a product of such syllabuses-full of academic and luxury knowledge that did not and does not automatically generate practice and readiness of communication). The realistic, authentic tasks for the learners should not be underestimated; these tasks have great potential. Besides, they work as natural brakes to extensive classroom teaching.

This was the kind of teaching experience our language department faced when we tested the units from the newly prepared English textbook for medical students. It was designed as a task-based textbook. The feedback we got from testing its draft units showed that we needed to decrease the number of units/topics in our ESP syllabus if we did not want to give up or reduce our students' involvement in performing the tasks and problem-based activities. The revisions proved to be time-consuming but very productive and effective. The students appreciated this model of ESP syllabus and teaching more than the traditional ones, where they were supposed to be more passive than active.

Realism in the ESP syllabus should be expressed not only in the quality but also in the quantity of its contents. ESP learners require not only a desired and substantial "meal" but also an appropriate time for its consumption, otherwise they cannot digest it. Foreign language learners generally need to be involved in their classes, because learner passivity and non involvement will in fact sabotage the desired outcomes. "If the processes actively engage the learners, then a more positive outcome is assured" (Wajnryb 1992:124). Unfortunately, traditional ESP syllabuses are

not always meeting this demand. They are often overdesigned with "content" and manage by the quantity of their input to force teachers to lag behind the time schedule. This results in limited practical involvement of the learners. Such syllabuses are not realistic but idealistic in their goals. What they offer is impossible not only to teach but also to learn and master. More often they "chase" both teachers and learners and cause frustration on both sides.

In conclusion, we could say that realistically a designed ESP syllabus shows balance in its content quality and quantity. There should be balance between knowledge input communicated by the teacher textbook on the one side, and the activities, tasks, and problems internalizing this input on the other side. More importantly this balance should be realistically set in an adequate time frame. Timing, as we know, is not always possible to change. Otherwise, the syllabus may be designed for its own sake, being rather optimistic in what learners are really capable of achieving and mastering.

Finally, the reality of everyday life in Slovakia and other East European countries starting market economies requires pragmatism from ESP programs. These countries are facing a new age in syllabus/course designs in which the premises of any realistic and successful syllabus/course design should be:

- a marketing approach highlighting learners' needs and wants,
- authenticity in teaching/learning contents,
- realism in content quantity, vis-à-vis item restrictions.

Very inspiring and stimulating in this respect is an article by John Harbord (1995) stressing not only the necessity "of the day" to be as close to the learners' needs and potential as possible, but also showing how to execute this approach.

We could summarize it as follows:

- do not dwell on routine;
- be attentive to learners' needs and potentials-design syllabus/course programmes for them, not to impress superiors; and, last but not least;
- design syllabuses in more modules that balance quantity and quality of content input.

This seems to be the latest paradigm for ESP teachers: infusing more reality into teaching programmes and realistically designing the syllabus.

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